

AUREL SCHEIBLER

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Joe La Placa: „Blow Up“ (excerpts)

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"Blow Up: New Painting and Photoreality," Mar. 9-Apr. 10, 2004, at St. Paul's Gallery, 94-108 Northwood Street, Birmingham, U.K.

All surveillance photos end up in Birmingham.

England's second largest city, Birmingham is the final destination for a countrywide network of surveillance and spy cameras.

Yet for a place that specializes in visual image processing, Birmingham has a conspicuous lack of visual culture. The city is better known for the TV version of *Gladiators* (shot at the local sports arena) than for its cultural institutions.

The city has a daytime population of seven million but only two serious galleries.

One of Birmingham's cultural saviors is Ross Alderson, an art collector and owner of St. Paul's Gallery, which was opened a year ago in February 2003. Alderson is no stranger to the world of high technology. He was the developer of the first secure transaction on the internet in the UK and ran one of Birmingham's most successful ad agencies, whose main clients were from the IT industry.

When Alderson's 10-year-long passion for collecting contemporary art exceeded the spatial limitations of his home, he bought a large, undeveloped building in Birmingham's warehouse district near St. Paul's Square. After a complete face-lift, the 8,000-square-foot structure was transformed into a modern gallery space. St. Paul's current exhibition, "Blow Up: New Painting and Photoreality," features a range of painters who begin from a photographic starting point.

The exhibition includes 19 international artists who draw their subjects from today's dominant visual forces -- the Internet, television, movies, magazines, video games and billboards. This ultra-contemporary imagery becomes the visual lexicon from which the artists create a rich new language of painting, haunted by the ghost of photography.

The term "Photorealism" was coined in the late 1960s by the immensely successful New York art dealer and self-styled father of the movement, Louis K. Meisel.

Rule number three (of five) in Meisel's 1972 manifesto of Photorealism required all potential Photorealist painters to "have the technical ability to make the finished work appear photographic."

Although Photorealism became known for this trademark exhibition of technical dexterity, Alderson claims that much of the work has been "pigeon-holed on the basis of technique rather than artistic intent and achievement." "Blow Up" proposes we consider the work of the new generation of photo-based painters in terms of their choice of subjects.

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In Neil Gall's *Performance* (2003) a tactile jumble of children's toys -- lego blocks, balloons, extruded ropes of plasticine and pink rubber balls wrapped in electrical tape -- crowds the surface of the painting.

Hans Hoffman-like yellow and lime green squares push and pull the entire mass forward towards the picture plan. Gall admits this is a throwback to his day as an Abstract Expressionist painter -- only now, the painted gestures have been replaced by a photorealist rendering of lyrical playthings. Nell's new paintings have a metaphysical dimension to them as well, recalling Alberto Savinio's (brother of Giorgio de Chirico) *The Lost Ship* (1926).

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Neil Gall
Performance, 2003
Oil on canvas, 213 x 305 cm